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*“Science fiction and fantasy serve as important vehicles for feminist thought, particularly as bridges between theory and practice. No other genre so actively invites representation of the ultimate goals of feminism: world free of sexism, worlds in which women contributions are recognised and valued, worlds that explore the diversity of women desires and sexuality and worlds that move beyond gender.”*

- Elyce Rae Helford

Feminist science fiction is a sub-genre of science fiction. Feminist science fiction writers work on similar patterns of feminist ideals and ideology. Feministic science fiction is not just a world of imagination where women are the queens, the super heroines that take upon the rival kings and kingdoms but it is an ideal platform for invoking in the minds of its readers the values of gender equality, ending patriarchal oppression and gender biases, sexism, violence and take up topics that go beyond gender. The presentation of gender relations and that of gender roles in feministic science fiction are in contrast with the real-time gender relations. In the many themes of feministic science fiction, elements of science fiction like space travel, time travel, use of scientifically and technologically advanced gadgets like laser weapons, atomic guns, both utopias and dystopias, are given context in the story.

Female authors have been writing stories in science fiction as early as 15<sup>th</sup> century during the English Restoration period, to explore women's issues, roles and her place in a society. Margaret Cavendish's novel, *The Blazing world*, written in 1666 is considered by Dale Spender as fore runner to science fiction genre. But the Mary Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein* written in 1818 as an early work of science fiction that dealt with generating an asexual life form.

The first wave of feminism is marked by women's fight for suffrage, property rights. It extended between the periods 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The utopian literary movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century produced by many women writers whose works can be considered as a golden age of science fiction. Their works tried to address issues of sexism through their works. *The Sultana's Dream*, written by the noted

feminist Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a Bengali Muslim writer addresses the limited role of a women in colonial India. The book gives the cultural insights through role reversals. It is interesting to note that in the story, in an imaginary utopia, Ladyland, men are secluded and women perform all the duties that were once performed by men. The women are aided by a fictional electrical technology that enable them to do farming without the use of labour and even fly cars using the technology. Women scientists have successfully developed the technology to trap the solar power and thereby control the weather. Because the Ladyland, is ruled by women, crime is nowhere to be seen, as men are perceived as mostly responsible for all types of crimes. Even the working hours are increased by two hours as men used to waste six hours of the day in smoking. The religion in the Ladyland is that of love and truth. Purity is extended above all so that the list of sacred relations gets extended. The story was published in the madras based English periodical, *The Indian Ladies Magazine*, in 1905, before it was published as a book. The novel is critical of men and shows that women too can excel in the fields of science and technology. With women at the helm, the novel presses upon the women perspective that the world is full of peace in a world where men are secluded.

**In the utopian novel *Beatrice, the Sixteenth: being the personal narrative of Mary Hatherley, M. B., Explorer and Geographer***, written in 1909 by the writer Irene Clyde creates a genderless world. The story itself is told without the use of gendered nouns. Notably the novel is regarded as the first novel written by any transgender. In the story, *Beatrice, the sixteenth*, the protagonist, a female doctor when kicked by a camel, lands into a

country in another plane of existence in the land of Armeria, where the traditional gender roles are non-existent. It is run by the queen Beatrice the Sixteenth. It is a land of palaces and with life full of luxuries. There exist only two types of people, the free people and the slaves. For more than a thousand years the Armerians have ceased to slaughter animals and are purely vegetarians. Partnerships are based on love and companionships and are known as conjux. There is no name of divorce. As the Armerians are unable to reproduce they buy infants from neighbouring tribe. Mary is able to understand the language of the Armerians and communicate with them as it is a combination of Latin and Greek. Mary is able to uncover a plot to dethrone Beatrice by the queen of the neighbouring kingdom Uras. In the war that follows Mary supports the people of Armeria and they finally win the war. When the court astrologer when tries to help her find the way back to her home, she decides to remain in Armeria and conjux with Ilex. Mary takes the help of the court Astrologer in sending a manuscript to her friend in Scotland in our world who in turn helps getting it published by Irene Clyde.

The novel avoids the use of gendered pronouns and refers the characters as figure, person or personage in the novel. As one goes through the novel, feminine characteristics crop up more frequently. The book is in contrast to Ursula K Leguinn novel, *The left hand of darkness* where she uses masculine pronouns to refer the genderless characters.

The two world wars bought a great catastrophe on humanity. Women too participated in the two wars. Great developments took place in the field of science and technology during the period. When men were engaged in the battle field far from the mainland of Britain and America, women were working in the factories at home replacing men. Women played a greater role specially in the communist countries of the Soviet Union and of the Eastern Europe, during war, both at the battle field and in the ordinance factories and made great sacrifices that history cannot forget. It was a new role of women shouldering responsibility during the crisis of a nation. The two wars were notorious for war crimes on women and children. Raping of women to humiliate the fallen nations was a crime against humanity. The atrocities of war on women and children have impacted the women psyche the

most. Most of the feministic science fiction novels imagine a utopian world or a parallel world free of gender, rape, violence and free of war. It has been the women perspective that wars are thrust upon by men for which the women face the consequences.

Great social, cultural and technological changes took place after the two world wars and during the cold war period. The feministic Science fiction writers through their writings tried to explore the impact of these new changes on women both culturally and socially. The many SF magazines of the period, *The Avolonian*, *Astounding*, *The magazine of Fantasy and science fiction*, *Galaxy* encouraged and published the stories of the feministic science fiction writers that were radical, bold and new in content and structure of the times. The post-world war authors Judith Merrill, Alice Eleanor Jones. Shirley Jackson laid substantiative foundations for second- wave feminist SF authors to directly engage with the feminist project.

The second wave of feminism movement took place between the period 1960 to 1970's. If the first wave of feminism focussed on suffragette struggle, the second wave of feminism brought the issue of rape, reproductive rights, domestic violence, work place safety to the fore front. The three notable texts in this period are Ursula K Le Guinn's *the Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* and Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1970). In 1980, Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaids tale* (1985) is a dystopic tale of a theocratic society in which women have been systematically stripped of all liberty. The book reflects the fears in the mind of the writer, the possible aftermath and the fears of a male reprisal against the implementation of women rights in the society. In the 1990s, the James Tiptree, Jr award was announced to encourage women writers in science fiction. It is an annual award of science fiction or fantasy that is given in honour of James Tiptree, JR. Women writers and feminists have used science fiction for representing feminism seeking a world free of oppression, a world where women are given equal opportunities, a free from sexual and domestic violence against women in the society, worlds that values free liberal ideas of women, their desires and sexuality, and value gender relations and gender roles in society on terms of equality. Both women writers and feminists have played a very important role in bringing to light the female

perspectives of inequality, non-violence and their rhetoric against wars, sexuality, race, economics, reproduction rights, the issue of LGBT rights and environment and beyond. Women writers have played a very key role in promoting issues of global environment and climate change and shouldered the responsibility of making the issue as prime in the minds of people and the governments responsible for the future of the young generations. Writers of feminist science fiction have used these themes in their stories of utopias and dystopias to explore a society. Feminism is political as it critiques the dominant male culture and the women feminist science fiction writers have used the platform successfully for their fight for their due rights and for their rightful place in the society.

### **Utopian and dystopian Societies in the Feminist science fiction writings**

Feminist science fiction writings most often represent utopian or dystopian societies in their writings with emphasis on gender roles. Through utopias the feminist science fiction writers try to achieve an ideal society. In the novel, *Herland*, the author Charlotte Perkins Gilman, shows that a Utopian society is attainable without violence and that all questions can be solved with rational answers. It is a common trend that societies in feminist utopias are single gendered and it is always female, and intentionally free of men. There is no violence, society is free from patriarchy, free from oppressive restrictions on women and it is a society where women are superior to men in brawn and muscle. Women writers opine that a utopian model of society is achievable and through such societies one can overcome all obstacles. Philosophers like Michael Oakeshott, Isaiah Berlin and John Rawls feel that a utopian model of society can only be achieved through violence or hegemony and are at odd with women utopian writer's concepts of a utopian society. Anti-utopian philosophers rule out the possibilities of achieving a utopian model of an ideal society even in the distant future.

Dystopian science fiction unlike a utopian model of a society, represents a world terribly gone wrong. In dystopian science fiction, feminist writers try to exaggerate the already prevailing gender inequalities, oppression of women through patriarchy, political or through religious practices. In a Dystopian model of a society women remain as a house wife, bear children, taking care of their families until they are no

longer useful. Some influential women writers in dystopian science fiction include Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia Butler and Angela Carter.

### **Indian women science fiction writers**

Begum Rokeya Shakawat Hossain's novel, *Sultana's Dreams* is considered as India's first science fiction novel published in 1905 more than a century ago. Manjula Padmanabhan is an author, artist, playwright, cartoonist and columnist. She is regarded as the first women cartoonist. Her novel, *Harvest* that was published in the year 1997, got great acclamation for her writing skills and even won the Onassis award, making her achieve a global audience. *The Island of lost girls* is another must to read novel by the author. Sukanya Venkatraghavan's *Dark Things*, Shweta Taneja's *Anantya Tantarist*, the *Demon hunters of Chottanikkara*, Tashan Mehta's *The Liar's Weave* make a good read of Indian women's writings in science fiction.

### **Women writers in science fiction and challenges**

The genre of science fiction has been and is a male dominated genre. Even today for every two male writers there is only one female writer in science fiction. Several women writers had to write using pseudonyms to compete in the male dominated market. Alice Norton wrote her stories under the pseudonym of Andre Norton and Alice Bradley Sheldon used the pseudonym James Tiptree Jr for decades to keep her literary life separate from her career in academics. Most of the female writings in science fiction fall in the category of soft science fiction. The greatest hurdle is that the readers of science fiction stories are carried away by the male character as a protagonist in the story or as the hero in the story and are usually not prepared to accept women character in a dominating role in the story. And most critiques of science fiction writings do not accept the concept of a utopian model of a society as a possibility even in the distant future. feminism is a political, economic and social movement by women. It has been and is a fight for their rights against inequality they face in a male dominated, biased society. It is an outcry against sexism, rape, violence of all kinds against women, equal pay and opportunities, LGBT rights, identity of women in society, their reproductive rights, prevailing patriarchy etc. women writers like Octavia Butler, Ursula K Leguin, N. K. Jemisin, etc have made a great mark in the world of science fiction writing by

using the genre as a platform to exercise their ideology of feminism and with their bold and radical ideas, ushering feminist science fiction as another sub-genre of science fiction. N K Jemisin is the first writer to win the Hugo Best Novel award three times consecutively. Constance Elaine Trimmer Willis or Connie Willis has won more Hugo or Nebula Awards than any other writer in science fiction writing. She won eleven Hugo Awards and seven Nebula Awards for her works in science fiction. Contribution by women writings in feminist science fiction is highly commendable and remains unparalleled.

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2. Brian Aldiss has argued that Frankenstein should be considered the first true science fiction story, because unlike in previous stories with fantastical elements resembling those of later science fiction, the central character "makes a deliberate decision" and "turns to modern experiments in the laboratory" to achieve fantastic results. See *The Detached Retina: Aspects of SF and Fantasy* by Brian Aldiss (1995), page 78.
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